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WARNINGS  
AGAINST  
SUPERSTITION.

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# WARNINGS

AGAINST

## SUPERSTITION,

*In Four Sermons for the Day.*

BY

J. LLEWELYN DAVIES, M.A.

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THESE Sermons, printed by the desire of some of those who heard them, are intended chiefly for their use. But I shall be glad if their publication serves to awaken in any other minds the watchfulness which I have endeavoured to commend to my own congregation.



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# I.

## LIGHT AND HEALTH.

[*Advent Sunday, 1873.*]

ISAIAH LVIII. 8.—“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily.”

THESE, my brethren, are the truest watchwords of the Advent season, *Light* and *Health*.

The Coming of the Son of God in the flesh was the coming of One who proclaimed himself the Light of the world and the bringer of Saving Health to mankind.

And the triumph that we look for when the spiritual kingdom of the Son of man prevails over all its foes, is emphatically the triumph of Light over darkness, of Health over corruption. The tradition of the Advent season invites us to look forward into the future in the faith and hope of this triumph, and to consider what hindrances to its arrival exist amongst us, and against what temptations the lovers of Light and Health have need to be on their guard.

Any hopeful contemplation of the glory that is to be revealed will make us aware of much evil that is too easily allowed amongst us, and will touch our consciences, I hope, with some shame at our own part in it. But I think that if at the present moment we keep our eyes firmly directed upon the *character* of the Divine purposes, we shall be led to observe a subtle danger besetting those especially whom I might call the children of the Kingdom. The danger I mean is that of following after *Religion* simply, without taking into account the quality of the Religion to be pursued. There is Religion and Religion; and we might have a great revival of Religion, without an increased enjoyment of spiritual Light and Health. It is of some questionable forms of Religion that I propose to speak to you on these Sundays in Advent; of certain influences not inaccurately called religious, but which are not likely to bring light and health on their wings.

It is a mistaken habit to speak of Religion as if it were absolutely a good thing. But it is a not uncommon one, and one into which any of us may naturally slide. For many uses the term is a convenient one, and it seems to save the names of God and Christ from too familiar handling.

Religion, however, it ought to be remembered, is not the same thing as God, or as the Kingdom of God, or as the Gospel of Christ. It may be the duty of the followers of Christ to contend against the spread of Religion. Recall to your minds how earnest and vehement St Paul was against a sort of Religion which was spreading itself in the churches over which he had the oversight. His adversaries were those whom we call Judaizers; they sought to maintain the authority of the Jewish ceremonial over believers in Christ. It could not have been fairly affirmed of these Judaizing Christians, that they were not religious, or that they were not in earnest. They were very religious; they held the civil authority in most religious contempt; they appealed to men in the name of supernatural sanctions to take trouble and do what was disagreeable to them. Yet St Paul declared that they reduced his Gospel to a nullity, and he never tired of beseeching his converts to beware of allowing themselves to be brought into a religious bondage. This conflict of his, which occupies so much space in his letters, is the more remarkable, because he is opposing a subtle and insidious tendency, and not a rival creed. Many, I imagine, of his hearers must have been

startled and surprised at the vehemence with which St Paul protested against the teaching of men who were fellow-Christians, and whom he had no desire to cast out of the Church. Some, I dare say, put it down to personal jealousy. But they did not know St Paul. Those who had entered into his convictions and feelings about the Gospel of the grace of God were better able to understand his anxiety, that the preaching of a Redemption to be won by human hearts and lives through a joyful acceptance of the reconciling purposes of God, should not be supplanted by the preaching of a Religion to be forced by threats upon men's observance.

Even Paganism was entitled to the name of Religion. And the Apostles who went about proclaiming Christ had it much more in their minds to announce a deliverance from Religion than to persuade men to be more religious. From some emphatically religious influences, from some fears of the supernatural, they earnestly desired to set men free.

I have referred to the New Testament to show that we have Apostolical authority for reminding ourselves that Religion may have its evil elements, and that those elements may not improbably go with a Christian profession.



But I will come at once to our own time. It seems to me that we ought to be prepared boldly to interrogate the modes of religion of our day, and to test them by their congeniality with the Light and Health which it was the glory of the Gospel to bring into the world.

Some would say that this is not an age of Religion; and in part they would be right. We are kept continually mindful of the shaking of old beliefs and traditions which has characterized this age. Those who have not felt it at all in themselves have been compelled to see the effects of it in others. For evil and for good,—remember, dear brethren, that it may be, with God's blessing, for infinitely more good than evil,—this is a time, not of stagnation, but of inquiry and mental disturbance.

This is true; but none the less, there are symptoms also of a growth of religion in our time. And this characteristic is partly a fruit of the other. Doubt and free inquiry may lead to religion in more ways than one. It is possible that inquiry, though at first unsettling, may be ultimately the cause of deeper and more settled convictions concerning the ways of God. Then again the very fact of doubting implies some serious thoughtfulness, at least in many minds;

for I need not say that it is easier to take things for granted and not trouble oneself about proofs and grounds than to undertake the responsibility of discerning between the true and the false: and serious thoughtfulness is nearly allied to the religious habit of mind, is, indeed, almost another name for it. There is a third way. When scepticism is in the air, it is likely enough to repel and alarm the majority of minds; the notion of keeping their thoughts a blank concerning things unseen and future is dreary and intolerable to them; they are apprehensive, with good reason, of the consequences to themselves and to others of unbelief; they feel, also not without reason, very incompetent to examine the grounds of faith. What can they do, then? It is very natural that they should run away, as it were, from the scepticism, and take refuge in the religion which shuts out inquiry.

There have been striking symptoms of a reaction of this sort within the last few years on the Continent of Europe. There has been more infidelity, as you know, in Roman Catholic countries than in England. In France, it was commonly assumed that the educated classes, or at least the men, were almost entirely alienated from the faith of their Church. But in France

there has been a very considerable revival of religion. And unfortunately the religion that has begun to prevail is of the most ultra-Roman type. Men have vied with one another in placing themselves absolutely in subjection to the authority of the Church, which has become the despotic authority of the Pope and his advisers. They have delighted in flinging down a kind of defiance to reason and modern thought. The great boast of this revived religion has been the re-introduction of the obsolete custom of making pilgrimages. It is enough to make us wonder, that educated persons in these days should flock in multitudes as pilgrims to any shrines at all. But it increases our wonder, that the favourite shrine of pilgrimage should be such a one as that in which the devotion of the Sacred Heart had its origin. The worshippers seem to say, "We will get away as far as we possibly can from this modern spirit which has frightened us. We will not be on the side of reason, but on the side of faith. Let unbelievers despise us as they please; we prefer the warmth and comfort and hope of submissive uninquiring but loving devotion, to the cold worldliness of infidelity. And we are glad to find there are a good many of us, to support one another. We will draw

close together, that one may borrow warmth from the other. Who knows that Religion may not be again before long in the ascendant, and be able to put its foot on the enemies of God and of the Church?"

This movement of reaction has not been confined to the Continent. The Roman Catholic Church has won converts in this country, very much through its offer of a warm shelter out of the reach of inquiry and doubt. And the English converts have shewn themselves ready to sympathize courageously with the most ultra-Roman sentiments and practices of their Continental brethren. If it be in the permitted future that doubt should produce more fallings away and spread more misery and fear amongst us, it may be expected, almost as a matter of certainty, that conversions to Rome will still go on. There will be those who will say, "There is but one refuge for us out of these uncertainties; and that is in the bosom of an infallible Church."

But it is not my purpose now to speak of dangers to which we are exposed from the attractions of the Church of Rome. There is a wave of tendency within our own Church, in which we may trace modified forms of the same

influences which are at work in the Roman Catholic revival abroad. I refer to the desire to create a half sensuous atmosphere of awe about the worshipper, to the deliberate shutting out of knowledge and thought, to the artificial generating of religious emotion, to the use of crutches of superstition for weak faith to rest upon, to the promoting of that valetudinarian and egotistic habit of mind which craves the comfort of confession; and, generally, to the holding up of an ideal of religious life which is not that of the Prayer-Book of the Church of England nor yet that of the New Testament. I ask you not to give way passively to these influences, and not to be indifferent about their progress.

These modes of action are adopted in all sincerity, it is said, in the interest of Religion. I willingly admit it. I am willing to go further, and to admit that they may be very effective in promoting Religion. But what then? We owe no allegiance to Religion. We are not placed here to promote Religion. The question is, whether these things are agencies of Light and Health, whether they are according to the mind of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whether they tend to build up mankind in the strength and harmony and activity of the Body of Christ.

And I feel it to be the more necessary that we should all seriously ask this question, in consideration of the special attempts that are being made to revive Religion in the Church of England. There is something very impressive in the idea of that "Mission," as it is called, which the Bishops desire to be undertaken throughout the whole of this vast metropolis in February next. It is enough to make the hearts of all good Christians yearn with hope and anxiety. The purpose of the "Mission" is to use the most effective means that can be devised, during the space of a week or ten days, for the stirring up of men's souls and the bringing of them to God. Think of this being the chief matter of common interest in London from East to West, from North to South, for so many days; or, at least, of the entire Metropolitan Ministry of the Church of England bending its united efforts to this end! This is no ordinary attempt; and the fervour and zeal that are likely to be thrown into it can scarcely fail of reaping some reward. The aim is to promote Religion; and it is reasonable to expect that Religion will be promoted. But, with the tendencies now working in the Church of England, and with the natural kinship between an

attempt to make a sudden strong impression on men's souls and that artificial kind of Religion which I have briefly described, may it not also be feared, that there will be some questionable effects in the total result left behind by the Mission?

Now questionable religious tendencies are to be tested by their agreement with the nature of God, and with what he desires for men. It is by looking to the revealed character of the will and the purposes of God, that we shall best learn whether any particular type of religion is good or not.

Love and righteousness, we are taught, are the essential attributes of the Divine nature. Gracious and righteous is the Lord. Of these two attributes, as we see them declared in the Old Testament and manifested in the life of Jesus Christ, Love is the more fundamental. Righteousness, or the maintaining of Order, is the mode in which God's love works. Love that does not maintain a harmonious order is inconceivable; and the order of the universe, especially its moral order, cannot be thoroughly understood, except as having its root in a Loving Will. Such is our God; and what is his purpose for men? He has created us to be in

filial fellowship with himself; he desires to have his righteousness fulfilled in us. He therefore seeks our confidence, our faith. He wishes us to give ourselves up in loving trust to him, that we may live according to his will. This is his purpose in Christ,—to reconcile us to himself, and make us one body of harmonious, joyful, active, members. The true light is this grace shining forth in Christ; the true health is in willing fellowship, the intelligent fellowship of sons and brothers.

We may surely judge, from this revealed will of God, whether in any pursuit of religion we are on the right tack. Is *this* what God delights in,—a timid shrinking soul, occupied with the cares of its own salvation, preferring the twilight, hanging to a priest, turning away from the social life of mankind, with its duties, its interests, and its organization, as little better than profane? Can it be a satisfaction to our God to look down on men wearing the fetters of superstitious fears, thinking more of safety than of truth, trying their little expedients to propitiate him, herding together to generate emotion in the hope that it will be acceptable to him? Nay, but our God is the Creator and Fountain of freedom and order, and he desires



that men should be free and orderly and that they should labour to subdue his world to obedience. God wants from men nothing made up artificially to please him. That each should fill his own place, humbly, trustfully, loyally, this is acceptable with him.

Listen, once again, to the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord. "When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed; judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." "Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen,—to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou

cover him ; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh ? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily : and thy righteousness shall go before thee ; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rereward." Magnificent words ! yes, and they set before us with instructive definiteness what we should look for and aim at. Is this ancient ideal of the prophets of Israel broken up by the New Covenant, that a different one may be substituted in its room ? Not so. The Son of man does indeed present to us a deeper tenderness and pity, a more universal love, a richer converse with the Father. But Christ and his disciples have no commendations for gloom, or effeminacy, or helplessness, or egotistic self-regard, or separation from social life. Under the Gospel, secrets are revealed, daylight is let in upon the heart, trust in God is declared to be the right of every child of man, the truth is offered without artifice to the conscience, freedom is the inheritance of the true believer. We are brought as Christians into the open air of God's heaven. The Church is no cunningly elaborated institution, devised to operate with mysterious powers for the saving of a certain number of confiding souls. It is the ideal

brotherhood of the children of God, mysterious as nature is mysterious, bound together in Christ who is at the right hand of God, with the Divine Spirit for its breath of life.

Stand fast therefore, dear brethren, in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. I do not ask you to be content with the things of secular life, to take no account of sin, to be indifferent to the means of grace, to reduce the ideal of a Christian to that of an ordinary prosperous self-satisfied Englishman. You will not so misunderstand me. But I beg you to be jealous for the Bible ideal of a Christian as against any which would insidiously supplant it. I ask you not to let Religion do with you what it pleases, simply because it is Religion. Compel it to shew its credentials, before you give it your confidence. Think it not only your right, but your duty, to guard the better traditions of this English land for yourselves and for your children after you. Look at your country, at your brethren, with as much earnestness and sense of responsibility as into your own souls. Judge whether profligacy and waste and idleness, whether careless helplessness and dependence, whether ignorance and vice and brutality, ought

to be acquiesced in by a Christian community. You will find in the positive evils which afflict us enough to sober and depress you, enough to drive you to God in prayer and confession, enough to engage your most earnest and inward efforts. But you have also the right in Christ to be thankful for many blessings which God has bestowed upon us, for the noble works done in the days of our fathers and in the old time before them. And by the pain and the joy together we shall be impelled to look forward with hope. The present does not content us; no, we want something much better, we want much more of righteousness and of love. But we can believe that he who gave his Son for the life of the world, and has brought the world on thus far, has the better things which we long for in store for it. So let us wait with patience; but let the patience be that of hope and prayer.

## II.

### SENSUOUS AWE.

[*Second Sunday in Advent, 1873.*]

2 COR. III. 12.—“Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech.”

THE chief points of my last Sunday’s sermon, as you will remember, were as follows :

That religion may be bad, in various degrees, as well as good ;

That faithful Christians are bound to repudiate those forms of religion which are out of harmony with light and health and liberty ; and

That there are circumstances at the present time which call on us to be watchful against influences which may increase religion amongst us without bettering its quality.

I am about to speak this morning of one of these influences,—the endeavour to create an artificial atmosphere of mysterious awe around the worshipper. I desire to speak here of this tendency as of one with which we may all have

some sympathy, and in such a manner that those who sympathize with it more strongly than others shall be able to listen without pain.

1. The word *mystery* is used frequently in the New Testament, and almost always, if not always, it might be rendered by the equivalent word "secret." Mystery is recognized, therefore, under the New Covenant; secrets are recognized. But you will find that the word is generally introduced for the purpose of affirming that the mystery is made intelligible, that the secret is disclosed. Twenty out of the twenty-six places in which the New Testament has the word are in St Paul's writings. And it was one of his main statements, that the eternal purpose of God, which had been a secret, or a mystery, was disclosed in Christ, and was no longer a hidden thing to those who thoroughly received the Gospel. This was emphatically the thought with which the word mystery was associated in St Paul's mind. He gloried in *revelation*, that is to say, in the opposite of concealment or disguise. Undoubtedly the incomprehensibility of God remained; but the Gospel had thrown a great light on his ways, and had enabled men to advance almost

immeasurably further in the knowledge of God than they could before.

This then is the most properly Christian application of the word mystery. It represents the darkness cleared away by the Gospel.

But very early the title "*the mysteries*" came to be applied to the principal ordinance of Christian worship. This usage was not derived from the New Testament. There can be no doubt, I imagine, that it was borrowed from heathen religion. There were certain celebrations well known by the name of Mysteries,—the most famous in classical history being the Eleusinian Mysteries,—of which secrecy was the characteristic. The secrets of these celebrations were only made known to the initiated; and to this day no one knows what took place behind the veil of the Mysteries. Probably, if we did know, the revelation might not be more interesting than that of the secrets of Freemasonry would be. But in an age of mingled scepticism and credulity there was a fascination about artificial secrecy; and in the early part of the Christian era secret forms of worship were popular. I am afraid that it was from these heathen mysteries that the name passed to the Eucharist, or Thanksgiving, of the Christian

Church. Circumstances favoured the application. The Christians were compelled by persecution to carry on their worship privately. Their ordinance of Communion was in truth a Mystery to the uninitiated heathen. The fellowship with Christ implied in the joint partaking of Bread and Wine under the name of his Body and Blood, is not and never can be a trivial matter, a thing of the streets. And then the Christians themselves were tempted, it must be allowed, by the artificial awe associated with Mysteries. And so it came to pass that the Christian Eucharist was lowered, in accepting this title, to the rank of the Eleusinian and other Mysteries of the heathen world.

Who could wish to deny that the relation of the Christian to his Lord, and to the Father through him, reaches into spiritual depths which we cannot fathom? or that the relation of visible things to invisible, of matter to will, of flesh to spirit, is beyond our power of explaining? or that the outward act which brings us into contact with the agony and loving death of our Saviour is one to be treated with tender reverence? But let the reverence draw from the most genuine fountains. There is nothing Christian, according to the Apostolic account of



Christianity, in thrusting mysteries on the mind, in manufacturing sacred difficulties to depress the understanding and to awe the imagination. The Real Presence of Christ,—that, assuredly, is a solemn fact. But it is the Presence, it is the Reality of it, that should make us serious. It is not peculiarly Christian, that we should be indifferent to the Real Presence of Christ or of God, in itself, but should become profoundly affected by the association of that Presence with outward elements. Speaking for myself, I would say, Believe as much as you can in the Presence, yes in the Sacrificial Presence, of Christ in the Bread and the Wine of the Sacrament, so long as it is the living Christ you are thinking of, and so long as you heartily believe that he who said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them,” is Really Present with us now. It may be truly said that the use of Sacramental Bread and Wine helps us to realize Christ as in the flesh, and as giving himself through death for the life of the world. That, no doubt, is the purpose of the Sacrament. But let us bear two things in mind: that Christ manifested himself in the flesh in order that we might know him more profitably in the Spirit;

and that, when he was in the flesh, he wished his disciples to know him in freedom, as a friend is known by friends.

2. I go on to say a few words about the more general endeavour to make the accessories and modes of religious worship impressive and subduing to the imagination.

It is difficult for a thoughtful and considerate person to speak positively on this subject, because, in all that relates to common forms, so much depends upon Taste and Feeling, and Taste and Feeling, again, are so powerfully influenced by custom.

We are familiar enough with different extremes of practice, with regard to the forms of religious worship. You may represent to yourselves, on the one hand, a building like a barn, with its inside walls bare and cold, marked in every part, and not least where the Christian altar stands, by signs of indifference and neglect; the worshippers and perhaps the minister using hardly any forms of religious gesture, but behaving with nearly as much freedom as if they were outside the building. This you may describe as the Presbyterian or the Puritan usage. You may represent to yourselves a very different scene; a beautiful ecclesiastical building,

with the dyes of its storied windows casting a dim religious light, rich with solemn ornament, each part reverently cared for, but especially the sanctuary and the altar, the forms and the attitudes and the tones of worship all studied for imaginative effect,—a scene striking you as something so different from the common outside world, a sheltering refuge for faith and devotion. This you may call the Catholic usage.

Yet every one knows that the feeling towards religious forms is profoundly affected by habit, and that there may be more of devotion and reverence in some Presbyterian than in some Roman Catholic worshipper, in a Presbyterian than in a Roman Catholic congregation; nay, that the very action of the service may in particular cases not improbably touch and move the Presbyterian more than the Roman Catholic. Forms which are perfectly familiar to us, we take as they come, and are not greatly affected by them. The way in which a service may impress any one to whom it is new and strange, is no measure of its influence upon those who are accustomed to it. When we are observing examples of this force of habit, we might be led to doubt whether such variations in outward form as those to which I have alluded make

any substantial difference at all to the effect of worship upon the mind of the worshipper. And it would certainly be a wise conclusion, not to attach an excessive importance to differences of ritual.

But it is a peculiar state of things, when changes are being introduced. It is natural that we should then feel, whatever view we may take of it, that there is great significance in the tendency which prevails. We know that the endeavour to invest our common worship with greater solemnity and awe, by modifications of the interior of our Churches and of the behaviour of ministers and people, has excited warm enthusiasm in some, and in others has provoked fear and resistance.

The introduction of more taste and art and care into our ritual has in some degree carried the whole population along with it. It belongs in part to a movement which is general as well as religious, and affects common life no less than Churches. There is ritualism amongst Dissenters as well as in the Church. Probably most persons of middle age are conscious of having moved with the stream, and many can remember that they once felt a repugnance to things which now almost every one prefers.

It is not creditable that there should be unreasonable panic and misjudgment about attempted improvements of the externals of worship. But I venture to plead two justifying considerations in excuse of the instinct of resistance to such attempts. First, I think it is reasonable to deprecate *excessive* or *abrupt* change, in our traditional ways of worship. Feelings of reverence grow up entwined with arrangements or customs which may not be in themselves the best. And the real want of reverence is in those who treat with levity or roughness religious habits which have been the inheritance of any generation. Whilst it is not to be desired that ritual forms should be stereotyped, the change of them ought not only to be manifestly for the better, but it ought also to be made as smoothly and gently as possible. Secondly, I am convinced that it is well to be watchful against making too much of the *senses* in religion. We are always in danger of falling away from spirituality. A sensuous worship, appealing in however refined a way to eye and ear and artistic feeling, may be a subtle snare; and the danger of it is much increased, if there is a deliberate attempt to muzzle and chain up the understanding, in the interest of sentiment and of the imagination.

There are other ways of trying to make people religious through the senses, besides that of an impressive ritual. Particular modes of preaching, prayer-meetings of an exciting character, especially those carried on at night, and generally those agencies which might be described by a popular term as "sensational," have no claim to be approved in the mere fact that they may be effective. We are not to be content with the question, Do they promote religion? but are bound to ask further, *What sort of religion* do they promote?

Stimulating services carried on at night have always been regarded with suspicion in the Church. So far as it rested on the darkness which belongs to the night-time, that suspicion is met and dispelled by our modern appliances for artificial illumination. To most of us now the very strong prejudice against which the custom of holding service in Churches on Sunday evenings had to contend, when it was first introduced not very long ago, is scarcely intelligible. We none of us disapprove of Evening Services in Church. A more recent innovation of the same kind, the celebration of the Holy Communion at an Evening service, has been objected to with somewhat unaccountable

warmth. In old times it is easily conceivable that there would be adequate reasons against it. The Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ may justly claim the utmost clearness of head, the most undisturbed sobriety of feeling, in the Communicants. And if there were any real danger of people coming to it in the Evening in fulness of meat and drink, or in a state of nervous excitability, reverence would prescribe that that time should be avoided. But of such danger I see no symptoms whatever. To many persons the closing hours of Sunday are the most devotional hours of the whole week, during which the mind turns most readily and most calmly to reverent contemplation. And there is nothing exciting in our Christian "mysteries," celebrated as they are with such absolute openness as well as so frequently. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, celebrated once a year, the climax of fascination was when the initiated person was led by a conductor through a dark passage into a chamber blazing with light, and there had the secrets shewn to him. By all means let us avoid such paths; God forbid that the minister of Christ, the priest of the Church of England, should assume the character of a *mystagogue*.

3. It is one grave objection to these modes of religion which aim at generating sensations of awe and fear in the worshipper, that they do not fit in with every-day life and duties.

The Christian is called, like David, to serve his own generation by the will of God. Our devotions ought to prepare us for this service. Those are the best, which make a pure, upright and useful life easiest and happiest to us, and which fortify us most effectually against the temptations which beset us in our path. For this reason it is not well that our religion should be separated too much from our ordinary life, that there should be too wide a breach between the Sunday and the week-days, that in passing from work to our devotions we should exchange too consciously the atmosphere of one set of sensations for the atmosphere of another set. It is not to be desired that we should forget, when we come to Church or when we approach the Table of the Lord, that we are Englishmen and Englishwomen of to-day; lest when we go to our English work and conversation we should forget that we are members of Jesus Christ and brethren in the Lord.

The division of secular interests from religious is being urged upon us from many quarters;



in resisting these efforts, we shall find some strength in keeping our offices of religion and our devotions as much in harmony with modern instincts and modern habits as is compatible with genuine depth of feeling and with sincere loyalty to Christ.

4. Another objection is that such modes of religion are not favourable to the *health* of the spirit. Our Baptismal office speaks of things "which a Christian ought to know and believe *to his soul's health*." All our practices of devotion ought to promote this same health.

Now it is known in this age, though it is far from being sufficiently remembered, that light and fresh air, do more, as a general rule, for the bodily health than any depressing regimen, or than any stimulants for which there may be a craving. For the soul also, as well as for the body, there is light, and fresh air, and freedom, and activity; and the enjoyment of these is more necessary for spiritual health than any prescriptions. The light is that which comes from the Father in the face of Jesus Christ; the fresh air is that life-giving Spirit of God which breathes throughout his world; the freedom is emancipation from slavish fears and tyrannies; the activity is that of doing the will of God.

There is more than a fanciful analogy between the light and air of the physical world and the light and air of the spiritual world. An outdoor service has often been felt to give a freshening impulse to the spirit. Can you not imagine that a company of Christian men, compelled by some necessity to forego a house of worship, if they assembled in Christ's name upon some breezy hill-side, and there with the sunlight poured around them celebrated the Communion of their Lord's Body and Blood in simplicity and truth, might part more thoroughly strengthened and refreshed, with a deeper and more natural sense of fellowship with the Father of all and with the Saviour who died for all, than if they had communicated with the utmost pomp of worship which some great Cathedral could display? I ask you, dear brethren, to look with desire for whatever may make you simpler, firmer, more joyful and more vigorous Christians. The grace that will do this for us is to be found, doubt it not, through the means which have been ordained for us; but let us look for it in the heaven which the means of grace open to us, and not in a cloud enveloping those means. We may not always have an appetite for what is most wholesome. We may

be inclined to admit that there is a solemnizing influence in a half-light of mystery, that the bending and prostration of the body are akin to the Christian humility which befits the sinner, and that fears and shrinkings are the appointed heritage of the soul which has so much reason to deprecate the wrath of God. But, my brethren, remember that we do not choose our Christian calling for ourselves. God sheds his light upon us, he invites us to trust and freedom. He wants us to look up to heaven, and not to cower upon the earth. He offers to uphold us with his free Spirit. He bids us abound in hope through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Reverence, indeed, and seriousness ought to characterize our worship to the end. The more the vail is taken away from our hearts, the more we shall see to revere. If God has indeed declared that he loves us and makes us his children in his Son Jesus Christ, must not such love, such glory, fill us with awe? Who can be content to walk with mere levity and carelessness in a world which he believes that God has made and Christ has redeemed? The Christian who is most assured of the grace of God, and who sees most mysteries made plain by it, and who is most encouraged by it to go forward in

hope, will often look upon human life with fear and trembling. The transgressions of other men, the sin he knows in his own heart, will seem to him terrible. But he will think it wrong to give way to them, and to despair. He will find support in dwelling with St Paul upon the revealed purpose of God. He is the worshipper of a God who does not hide himself, but makes himself known ; of a God who teaches us to judge of what he will do by what he has done.

Let us come into his courts with such a mind, dear brethren, as he would himself form within us. Let us entreat his Spirit to open our lips and to prompt our prayers. Let us suffer no outward things to interpose a barrier, however sacred, between our hearts and God, because it is God himself who bids us come to him as reconciled and forgiven children. Let us be thankful for all outward things which bear witness of God, and help us to come to him. May he fill us all with the very spirit of worship, that with one mind and one mouth we may glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### III.

#### CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION.

[*Third Sunday in Advent, 1873.*]

PSALM XXXII. 6.—“I said, I will confess my sins unto the LORD, and so thou forgavest the wickedness of my sin.”

AMONGST the tendencies which appear to me likely to have the effect of stimulating religion amongst us without improving its quality, is the introduction of the practice of *Confession*. The subject of Confession as a whole is a complicated one, and involves questions about which great controversial heat and confusion have arisen. I believe however that the essentially important aspect of it is that with which we are concerned to-day. Confession is a part of a religious regimen. Is it favourable to the genuine wellbeing of the soul, or not? Is the kind of religion which the practice of Confession tends to promote, the same thing as the light and health and liberty offered to mankind by the Gospel? That is what we want to know.

In the minds of most of those who are now

interested about Confession, whether they are in favour of it or against it, this practice is closely connected with Absolution; and Absolution is generally represented as implying more or less exalted sacerdotal pretensions. The whole controversy is therefore felt by many to turn really upon the power of the Priesthood,—upon the question whether a priest can give absolution or not. I admit that the controversy involves what might be called the *acting* powers of the priestly office; that is to say, that Confession makes the people practically dependent, in a most important manner and degree, upon the priest. But it seems to me that the dispute as to the power of the priest to give absolution has taken a wrong issue, and is carried on in a mist which a more searching inquiry into the alleged claims would dispel. As with regard to the Real Presence, and as with regard to Sacrifice, so with regard to Priestly Absolution, when you give to the term the very utmost meaning that it can imply, the objection to it vanishes. Let us go, past those who approximate to Romanism in our own Church, to Rome itself. Authoritative Roman theology does not assert that God gives away from himself to the priest the prerogative of pardoning sins. Still less, of

course, would Dr Pusey make any such assertion. All that the priest can do is to act as the channel or the messenger of the Divine forgiveness. But further, according to Roman theology, if the sinner does not inwardly repent, the absolution of the Pope himself would take no effect. In other words, all priestly absolution, which means, all declaration of the Divine forgiveness, is strictly conditional upon the repentance of the sinner, as to which no supernatural knowledge is claimed for the priest. And further again, Roman theology allows, that God himself forgives the truly penitent, though they may not receive actual absolution from a priest. What is described therefore as the tremendous power of forgiving sins claimed for the priest turns out to be not really claimed at all. The true claim is one of pastoral discipline. Roman and Romanizing theology lays down the rule, as one of order, that the faithful are to come and confess their sins to a priest and receive absolution from him. It affirms that this rule is a good rule, a wholesome rule, a Catholic rule. It declares that they who do not conform to it will incur a terrible responsibility, and probably cut themselves off from grace. But this is not because the priest forgives sins instead

of God, nor because God's forgiveness of sins comes through the priest only, but because the Catholic order in a vital matter has absolute claims on the obedience of the faithful.

If we were Roman Catholics, we should have nothing that we could reply to this requirement. But being what we are, we are quite at liberty to consider whether the pastoral discipline of private confession and absolution is wisely ordered or not. That is the essential question, as a matter of reasoning; and that is the practical question which it concerns us, as members of the Church of England, very seriously to ask now.

There are three elements in Confession which it may be advantageous to note separately.

Confession makes it the duty of the Christian,

to inspect his own soul scrupulously;

to lay bare the results of his inspection to another; and

to depend upon private absolution.

(1) I am speaking of what is understood by Confession now. It does not mean that one who has done a sinful act is to acknowledge it, to confess it to be wrong and blameable, and to endeavour to make such amends as are possible



for it. All who advocate Confession advocate a strict and searching practice of self-examination. Feelings, and not merely actions, are the material of Confession. It is urged, therefore, that Christians ought to look watchfully into their feelings, to probe their motives, to judge their sensations. Christian life, according to this view, as it approaches towards perfection, will become more and more *introspective*.

And ought we not to judge ourselves? Are we not bidden, by Holy Scripture, by the exhortations of our Liturgy, by the appeals of religious teachers of all schools, to examine ourselves? You see in a moment, my brethren, how much may be said in behalf of this element of Confession. The case for it may well seem irresistible. I will refrain at this point from arguing against the apparently overwhelming weight of authority in favour of rigorous self-examination; but I must return to the subject presently.

(2) The Christian who goes to Confession is next required to lay himself bare to the eye of another. I do not mean that any secrets which do not involve the possibility of sin are to be communicated to the priest. The communication of such secrets, if it take place at all, is

only incidental to the confessing of sin, and the seeking of advice, for the sake of which the Christian comes to the priest. But so far as *sin* is concerned,—sin of thought and feeling, as well as of act,—it is the virtue of a good confession to be as frank and explicit as possible. Probe your mind and heart without flinching, bring out without reserve in words whatever seems to you to have the nature of sin,—this is the moral law of Confession.

Now here, if I mistake not, you will feel that you must pause, and it is a point at which you might pause with trembling. There are texts, it is true, which may be quoted in support of this uncovering of the soul, such as this: “Confess your faults one to another.” If to any one, it may justly be urged, why not to the priest? But the texts will probably seem to you to mean something wholly different from what the modern doctrine of Confession assumes. The authority of Scripture texts cannot be brought to bear on this point without great straining. In our Prayer-Book there is no injunction from beginning to end which can be honestly construed as recommending such exposure.

You may ask, Is the thing *possible*? Does

any one who at all understands human nature, or any single person who reflects on the processes of his own mind, believe that to turn one's sinfulness inside out is even practicable in such a sense or degree as to make it desirable to attempt it? No, it is not possible to convey to another by words at all accurately the inward condition of one's own heart. All the crossing and blending of thoughts and feelings and motives which constitute the real inward life of a human soul disappear when a particular confession is put into words. No doubt it is possible to say with truth, "I have been guilty of such and such an act," or even more, "I know that I deliberately harboured and cherished such a passion or desire;" and confession, it may be presumed, generally consists of acknowledgments like these. But if it stops there, it will be felt by the earnest soul to be superficial. If we want God's absolution, we want it to penetrate much more deeply, to deal with us much more thoroughly, than can be done by a mere striking of certain acts out of the reckoning. The kind of confession that is invited by God's genuine absolution is, I repeat, impossible to put into answers which can be poured into the priest's ear,

But if we *could* lay ourselves bare, *ought* we to do so? Let each realize to himself the repugnance with which he would shrink from dwelling in memory and thought and words upon his past sinfulness; and let him try to judge honestly whether that repugnance is altogether an evil instinct. Many have been persuaded that they ought to stifle and overcome it, because that is the way to extirpate sin, and to acquire a more perfect holiness; but I think we have been taught enough to convince us that the shrinking is itself a sign pointing out to us a more excellent way.

(3) Thirdly, the practice of Confession invites Christians to depend upon a continually renewed private absolution. I do not say, to substitute the priest's forgiveness for God's forgiveness; but, to look for God's forgiveness as coming, from time to time, in the word "I absolve thee" from the priest's mouth. This would hardly be denied. And a most serious element it is in this practice of confession. Consider what it involves. I am in the habit, say, of going to confession. I do something of which my conscience accuses me. My thoughts immediately run forward to the next occasion on which I shall kneel to the priest's ear. Let

it be allowed in favour of confession that the prospect of having to make my sin known distresses me. It may be also that I look forward with hope to the absolution which I desire at any cost to receive. But in the mean time I am keeping my sin for the priest's ear. Until I can confess it, I carry it with me as a burden. From week to week, in fact, or from month to month, I am accumulating a load which at a given hour is to be cast off. Most assuredly, a momentous dependence upon the priesthood is thus inculcated. The transactions of the spirit with God are not to be carried on directly, but at intervals through an external representative. The whole idea of Divine forgiveness tends to become associated with the utterance of spoken words dealing with things that can be recited.

Now the one great argument for this discipline of confession and absolution is that it *promotes religion*. In this way, it is urged, Religion may get a hold of the ordinary life of Christians in general, which will not easily be shaken off. People will live and move and have their being in a certain salutary fear of the Confessional. The clergy will then have a chance of exercising influence, which they now miss through the mere want of confidential

personal intercourse. But, beyond this, here is a means provided, and the only means, for a systematic training of pious souls in the higher degrees of holiness. Frail and ignorant mortals need to be continually helped, warned, strengthened, guided. The priest ought to know the way to heaven, and to have the skill to lead others in it. The habit of Confession supplies the opportunity for leading humble souls nearer and nearer to heaven.

You know or can imagine how this argument is expanded. Well, our answer to it is, that the religion which may thus be promoted will not be the best kind of religion; that the way of confession is the way to an artificial, weakly, valetudinarian, sanctity; that absolution, which means freeing from chains, is thus turned into a binding of chains upon the conscience; that the introduction of Confession into the Church is not the way to spread the light and health and liberty of Christ.

Let me try to put before you briefly the more excellent way, characterizing it by reference to those three elements of Confession.

1. And first I say that the true Christian holiness looks upward and outward rather than inward. I do not forget those exhortations to

self-searching and self-judgment ; I respect them and wish them to have their due weight. But I contend that to look to Jesus Christ, to look up steadfastly towards heaven, to look on the interests of fellow-men, is ten times—a thousand times—more important than to look into the workings of one's own heart. Why consider, brethren. It is impossible to look *too much* to the Source of Light and Health ; a man cannot be occupied to excess with the contemplation of the mind and will and ways of the Father in heaven. But it is very possible to be thinking too much of oneself. It may be a disguised form of the subtle evil of self-love. It may do a man no good whatever to be brooding painfully over his own weakness, his own perverseness, his own want of cleanness in God's sight. And therefore I say, Let self-examination have its due place. Let men be warned against self-delusion, against paltering with conscience, against worldly compromises. There is unhappily need for these warnings. But let not the most well-meant contemplation of self take the place of contemplation of God. Nay the very mode of the healthiest and most effectual self-judgment is, not to look inwards and analyse, but to come face to face with the Light of God,—with the

Divine truth and love and purity. This is the way for a man to know himself. And when he has thoroughly condemned himself, let him put himself away, forget himself, lose himself. You do not call that an easy, tempting, kind of discipline?—You are more likely, I am sure, to plead that it is too arduous, too high. Well, at least, let us not admit that in setting the contemplation of God through Christ above self-scrutiny we are holding up a lower ideal of holiness.

2. Next, as to the method which we should prefer to that of self-exposure. If a Christian does not pry into himself, he will not be ready with information about his sins to communicate to another. But are we bound to desire that he should make efforts to register and describe his sins? On the contrary, in itself, and except as an indispensable means for the obtaining of some benefit, this process would be admitted, I should think, by almost every one to be undesirable and somewhat injurious. The instinct of reserve and delicacy is one of the loveliest of human instincts; and whatever offends it, or takes off its bloom, has a strong presumption against it.

Again, I do not deny that there are occasions



for the confession of sin. Most commonly the virtue of it is in simply saying "I have done wrong;" in giving up the endeavour to justify oneself or the cherishing of a feud, and humbling oneself to ask pardon. When Scripture speaks of the confession of sin, there is probably nothing meant about the bringing out of secrets. What it generally points to, at all events, is a willingness to put oneself in the wrong. But it may be also a duty to bring out hidden sins. A sinner may have been guilty, recently or long ago, of some transgression which has escaped the eye of the world, and which has had grievous consequences. If he has been touched by the awful grace of God, this sin will probably start up to accuse him. He will be afraid of it; he will long, if possible, to undo its consequences. It may be then most fit, most necessary, that he should yearn to unburden himself of this sin, and should welcome the open ear of the priest or clergyman, and crave the comfort of express absolution. I am as ready as any one else to honour the preaching that brings home to proud or careless or sin-covering men the sense of their blameworthiness, and the impulse to confess themselves sinners, and the longing for Divine forgiveness.

Further, if any one urges that we English people are too reserved, and that we lose much by our moral shyness and hesitation to confide in one another, and that it might often be an advantage to a troubled soul to have the ice of concealment broken and to be enabled to obtain relief and comfort and guidance, I am not at all anxious to deny that it is so. Often, beyond a doubt, the knowledge that people have a right to speak confidentially to their clergyman and to count on his sympathy and advice, has been not only comforting but helpful. Who would wish to put a prohibition on such intercourse? It is because it is necessary that these communications should be left open, that it is impossible for the Bishops or the Law to put down the habitual practice of Confession. But a candid mind will acknowledge that there is a real difference in kind between the free pastoral intercourse of clergyman and people, and the regular use of confession and absolution.

3. Thirdly, against the dependence on private and particular absolution, I would confidently set an assured sense of the forgiveness of God.

It is here that we come to the spiritual heart of the whole matter.

Let us by all means put the best sense upon priestly absolution. Let us take it to mean that the priest, in virtue of his charge as a minister of reconciliation, declares God's forgiveness of a particular sin to the sinner who repents of it. But then, is it possible that we should choose a system under which the Christian looks to a succession of such declarations applied to specified acts, rather than that relation of filial trust in which he cries Abba, Father, to God? This, surely, according to all the teaching of Apostles, and according to all the testimony of Christian experience, this is the perfect human life. We cannot indeed forget that men, so long as they are in the flesh, are sinners, daily losing their hold on the grace of God, continually coming short of his glory. Alas, no. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But then, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The reconciliation given to us in Christ is ever around us. God deals with us, Spirit with spirits, as a Father with children. It is not particular acts that God cares about, but the attitude of the heart towards him. He alone can know and judge our sinfulness, and

his measure is not man's measure. The one all-inclusive aim of the Christian should be, to live in unbroken inward fellowship with Christ and the Father, gaining more and more of victory over the influences that would draw him away from God, always advancing in the knowledge and the joy of sonship. What is it less than treason to this ideal, to encourage Christians to turn away from it that they may find their comfort and support in occasional and particular assurances of pardon? Remember that in our dealing with God as a pardoning God, we are not independent creatures, who sometimes break the law of a stronger power, and require to be excused from the penalties of transgression. That is not our condition under the Gospel covenant. God be praised, he has laid a foundation of grace and peace under our lives, and bids us build thankfully and hopefully upon it. He bids us repent, and our repentance has often good cause to be with shame and tears, but the core of our sin in his eyes is the spurning of his grace and love. *That* is the sin which we have need to confess from the bottom of our hearts, and that is not something we can report to a priest, and for which he could prescribe a penance. God's absolving grace comes

to us to deliver us from the bondage under which we groan, and to free us from sin by bringing us into willing subjection to love and goodness. This is our true sanctification,—to grow conformed in heart and will, through trust and hope and love, to the mind that was in the Son of God.

I ask you, dear brethren, not to let the poor ideal of the Confessional supplant unawares in your minds this glorious ideal of the Gospel of Christ. It was not by begging absolution for specified offences that the great saints of God fought their good fight and won their reward. It was by laying hold strongly of reconciling grace, by losing themselves in the bestowed forgiveness of God, by surrendering hearts and lives to the purifying Spirit of God. We who wish to be followers of them, as they followed Christ, must be careful to stand firm in the grace into which he has introduced us, and to rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

And if the argument change its ground, and it be asked that the help of the Confessional may be allowed to those who cannot aspire to be heroic soldiers of Jesus Christ, let us beware of ministering to weakness by a regimen that may make it weaker. We are all weak,

and might claim to use the pleadings of lowliness, "Lord, I am not high-minded, I have no proud looks, I do not exercise myself in great matters which are too high for me." But it is to those who know their weakness that the Eternal God offers his strength. It is not his way, to put off the humble and meek with external blessings. To them, as his chosen, the voice of the Deliverer comes with reassuring power, bidding them put their trust, for themselves and their brethren, in him who reconciled the world to himself in Christ, not imputing their trespasses unto them.

## IV.

### PRAYER.

*[Fourth Sunday in Advent, 1873.]*

ST JOHN XVI. 23.—“Verily, verily, I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.”

IT will be my aim to speak this morning in a manner that shall not seem vague and impractical upon a matter with regard to which too much definiteness appears to me inappropriate and undesirable. My text will have told you that this subject is that of Prayer. After what I have said of my purpose in these Advent Sermons you will also have inferred that I believe we are now in danger from superstition in the use of Prayer. That such a thing as superstitious Prayer is possible, will not be denied by any one who calls to mind what practices and forms of prayer have prevailed in heathen, or in half-heathen Christian, communities. And where religious persons are as little on their guard as many amongst us now are against the subtle encroachments of superstition,

there it is not unlikely that this evil may be invading any part of their religion. I think therefore that we need to consider watchfully the efforts and the tendencies of the time with regard to Prayer; and yet I feel strongly that the critical and defining mood is not that which is most congenial to its essential spirit. I shall speak what I say on this subject in the conviction that to encourage the true spirit of Prayer is a far better work than to expose errors that may be associated with it.

Let this be our foundation, that the *spirit of Prayer*, in the community and in each member of it, is what is essentially necessary and precious.

Our convictions about Prayer will depend upon other convictions which go before them. Prayer is not an object standing alone. It implies a God to be addressed, and a human soul to pray. Now Christians have a faith concerning God and his relation to men. We believe that God has communicated, and is communicating, with men. We believe that he has spoken to men in his Son; that in Jesus Christ he has manifested himself as our Father, and called us to be his children; that these are not idle names, but that they express a real and living relation between God and men; that



although we cannot see God, we may inwardly hear him speaking to us, as a Father would speak to his children, and may answer him, as children would address a Father. We believe this, as persons who live in a spiritual world, and have to do with God "in the Spirit." We believe therefore that it is the purpose of God, and our calling, that we should be drawn by the Spirit into ever closer fellowship with God.

With these convictions, it will seem to us a matter of course that we should look up to God in faith, and should turn our hearts, in all their natural moods, towards him. As St Paul says, God has sent the filial spirit into our hearts, crying Abba, Father, to him. Amongst those, then, who admit our filial relation towards God, there can be no question that the essential spirit of prayer ought to live and move in us; with those who do not admit it, it is not worth while to hold controversy about Prayer. But I would not have you think that, if all Christians are agreed as to the rightness of a spirit of Prayer, this may therefore be left on one side as a point not in dispute; that because there may be no controversy about it, it is therefore comparatively unimportant. I contend, brethren, that this spirit of Prayer is what is all-important. So

long as men that are God's children have desires, their spiritual state must be judged by the degree in which the desire of their hearts is towards God. It is everything else, in the range of this question, that is comparatively unimportant. It is the necessary sign and condition of our progress in the spiritual life that we should continually pray to our Father in heaven. What the utterances of this spirit of prayer may be, is a secondary matter. Some of the profoundest spiritual teachers appear to have felt that a prayer almost unconscious of itself, taking form in "unspoken sighings" or in "the motion of a hidden fire that trembles in the breast," might be deeper and more acceptable to God than one expressed even inwardly in words. And if any one asks what would be the efficacy of Prayer, in this sense of a spirit of Prayer possessing the hearts of Christians, you will not hesitate to say that when the hearts of men are turned in the name of their Saviour trustfully, hopefully, wistfully, towards their Father in heaven, pleading with him by their very instinctive motions to hasten the fulfilment of his good purposes, they are sure to prevail mightily with him to whom they pray, so that the effect of their prayers shall be manifest enough to the world.

But I go on to speak of forms in which Prayer may be clothed.

(1) Prayer is sometimes spoken of as if it were a kind of machinery that might be set in motion at will to produce given ends. And then the question is raised by those who do not believe in it, "Can the machinery be depended upon? Will it, as a matter of fact, do the work it is warranted to do?" Many of you have no doubt heard of the proposition recently made, that Prayer should be tested by setting apart one ward of a Hospital, upon which a large number of Christians should be invited to exert the force of their prayers, and by seeing whether the patients in that ward were cured more rapidly than in any other. I am afraid it cannot be denied that excuse has been given for this proposal by the prevalence of language which really treated Prayer as a battery which could be applied at any point at the will of the operator, as a useful mode of obtaining anything we desire. The suggestion of a practical scientific test has been advantageous in stirring up the instinct of reverence, and warning us against ways of thinking and speaking that might thus be challenged. It is not want of faith, no, it is a sounder faith,

which makes the Christian heart revolt from such a challenge. But then can we consistently say that we are satisfied with a good deal that we hear or read in recommendation of Prayer? Vows which offer God a bargain—"If thou wilt do this for me, I will do that for thee;" institutions advertised as supported by Prayer only; prayer-meetings to which the public are invited as "for both sexes;" fanciful devices, of a continuous chain of prayer on a given spot, and the like:—if you bring these into the light of our filial relation to the Living God who rules the world in wisdom and trains his spiritual children by the discipline of work and experience, will they not retreat, somewhat ashamed, into the darker corners in which men forget what kind of Being he is with whom they have to deal? Probably the truest comment on such applications of Prayer would be, that they are not *meant* to prevail with *God*, but are rather expedients for producing an effect on the weaker class of human souls.

(2) On the other hand I would say, when the heart of a man is really looking up to the God of light and health and liberty, *let the spirit of prayer prompt freely*, and let us not be too ready to criticize the forms or the objects

of prayer. After all, there is no great harm done, if human ignorance, meaning well, prays to God ignorantly. There is imperfection in the knowledge of the wisest. We do well to confess that at the best we know not what we should pray for as we ought. I am not disposed to give way to the argument, that Prayer must at all events let outward things alone, because outward things are evidently ruled by Law. If the argument asserts that the course of things is so fixed that no change can possibly be made in it, it proves too much. It tells us that all desire is ridiculous, that all effort is vain, that all thankfulness is a delusion, inasmuch as we are but passive elements in a course of things which cannot be altered. We may safely disregard an argument which affirms all this. But if the actual order of things is of such a kind that it may be modified by the effort of will, where is the impossibility of its being modified by prayer? The argument against praying about visible things, founded on the orderly relations which we observe in the universe, is manifestly inconclusive. But there is another principle which would exclude some of the prayers against which this argument is generally directed. We ought not to

pray,—I should rather say, we cannot really pray,—for things which we cannot rationally desire. Thus, to ask for a change in the weather, as there has been great eagerness to do of late years,—more, I think, to shew the courage of religion than to get the change asked for,—seems to me unworthy of English Christians. Sensible persons feel about the weather that they may very well be content to take it as it comes. In our confessed ignorance, I doubt whether we can have a better rule, than to let the spirit of prayer work *naturally*, so long as it is the movement of the heart towards a Father who knows what we need before we ask him. This rule would probably check the praying for rain or sunshine here. But on the other hand, in such a case as that of Bengal at the present moment, when the lives of millions are in danger, and a province threatened with desolation, it would seem to me unwarrantable to forbid prayers for deliverance, in the name of physical law. It is an utter mistake to think of prayer as *a substitute for exertion*. Rather it is the spiritual breath of exertion itself. When a godly man strives, he prays. The godliness in his striving is of the very spirit of prayer. And it is only natural and fit that he should

expressly pray for the ends for which he is labouring. If with a sure trust in God he is throwing forward the energies of his being towards certain ends, how will you persuade him that he must not pray to the God whom he serves that he will accomplish those ends? In one way or another, I do not doubt that the prayers of those who are piously endeavouring to ward off famine or to prepare themselves for its pressure will be found to avail much.

(3) There is something, I would suggest to you, in the great special idea of our time, which reinforces the principle of *natural* Prayer, embracing things visible and invisible alike. We are being taught to see God *working* in the universe, and working in the way of gradual evolution. The more any one dwells upon the evolution of the created universe, the less is it possible for him to draw a line of separation between visible and invisible things. I do not mean that Will becomes confounded with Matter, but that everything visible or otherwise sensible tends to present itself to us as a manifestation of thought, law, relation, invisible force. Well, but the study of Evolution teaches us also to think of the world, including ourselves, as being drawn onwards towards that which is better by

the mighty inworking of the Divine will,—a thought entirely in harmony with devout and earnest prayer. Let this thought of a *growing* universe sink deep into your minds, and as it there combines itself with faith in the grace and discipline of a Heavenly Father, it can hardly fail to excite that yearning towards the future which is the true germ of Prayer. You will pray because you hope, and feel that you are warranted in heartily desiring. We are in the midst of movement, of movement which moulds and modifies all things, of movement which is not anarchical or unmeaning, but orderly though mysterious, and on the whole towards that which is better, as the Creation of a good God ought to be. Is not this consciousness inspiring to sincere and hopeful prayer? Our prayers themselves, we may feel without shrinking, come naturally under the law of development. As we leave childhood behind, our prayers become less childish. As we learn to hope and desire with more knowledge, we learn to pray in forms that suit that knowledge. At any age or in any stage, that which is pleasing to God, that which is genuinely efficacious, is the right turning of the desire. The heart of the young child turned upward towards the Father, and uttering itself



in words which make the grown man smile, is really praying in the name of the Son of God, and obtaining the things which it asks. But it would be unreasonable to infer that we are therefore bound to stick to the words of infancy. Faith and hope, like love, abide essentially unchanged; but the intellectual forms in which they may clothe themselves vary and grow, and it is for the mind of the grown man to put away childish things.

(4) I have assumed, what all persons would admit, that prayer is the expression of desire or longing. Let me say a word or two on this particular aspect of it.

Ought prayer to be *importunate*, or not? We know by experience that, in dealings with our fellow-men, objects are sometimes attained by importunity. By asking again and again, we may enforce attention. We may make ourselves so disagreeable that our request is granted for the sake of getting rid of us. But can we seriously think of God as of a Being who is to be wearied by our continual coming, and of ourselves as having an interest in extorting some advantage from the carelessness of God? Such an idea is absurd; but, more than that, it must offend the true reverence of the filial heart.

Instead of being a characteristic of the spirit of prayer, it is in opposition to that spirit. Understood in any such sense, importunity in praying does dishonour to the nature of God, and therefore cannot be right. But is it then wrong to pray without ceasing, to pray instantly, to make our requests known with urgency to God? Not so: because God himself desires to breathe good longings into our hearts, to sustain and to stimulate them. If it were true that the recollection of our Heavenly Father as knowing what we need before we ask, and as ready to give more than we desire or deserve, must kill genuine urgency of prayer, there would be no help for it; we should be compelled to say, Let God be gracious, though the fervency of prayer be extinguished! But though faith makes the thought of wearying God with our petitions an odious one, and may undoubtedly tend to calm and quiet the spirit of prayer, it will have the effect of quickening the impatience with which we regard evil, and the longing with which we desire to see the good purposes of God fulfilled. When this impatient longing utters itself in prayer, we need not be over-critical of the words it uses. It pleases the Father that men should cry to him, "How long,

O Lord, how long?" that they should complain of his slowness and urge him to make haste to help them.

The acceptableness of such praying evidently depends upon the worthiness of the longings it expresses. That a man should pray importunately that he might win a prize in a lottery, would strike us all as low and unchristian. Eagerness to obtain any selfish boon does not become more respectable because it dignifies itself with the name of prayer. It remains a beggarly desire, and acquires besides the character of doing dishonour to God. If a man sets up his idols in his heart and so comes before God, God declares by the mouth of his prophet, "I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols." True prayer has this beauty and grace, that it binds men by a subtle but steady constraint to high and noble desires. That is one reason why we ought to be always praying, because we ought not to cherish any longing which we dare not lift upwards towards God. The prayers which Christ promises shall be answered are those which we offer in his name; and to pray to the Father in the Son's name, is to direct truly Christian desires heavenwards. The habit of trying to pray sincerely to the Father

of our Lord Jesus Christ is a sure way of exalting and purifying our desires.

(5) But if the inward motion of the heart is the essence of Prayer, is it in harmony with ~~this doctrine, that we should have special times and places and prepared forms of Prayer?~~

That is a fair question, and one which it is desirable to ask. Undoubtedly the use of this machinery of Prayer is attended by a constant danger,—a danger which, if it is forgotten, becomes the more threatening. It may betray us into formalism,—into the assumption, if not the deliberate conviction, that he, who seeks the worship of such as will worship him in spirit and in truth, is to be propitiated by outward shews. God is not, he cannot be, thus propitiated. Mere hollow forms of prayer may become an abomination to him. But regular times and words of prayer have always commended themselves to men as being necessary helps to the spirit of devotion. They are witnesses and mementoes of the duty of praying; they lead and encourage and train men to inward prayer. And public or common prayer has, in addition, the virtue of awaking the common consciousness of Christians. We cannot pray together without the use of common forms; and our Lord has attached a special blessing to

the joint praying of two or three who are gathered together in his name. We know something of the communion of the saints, of the fellowship in which Christians are spiritually bound to one another; but if we believed in it and realized it more heartily, we should learn the strength in the Divine Kingdom of the union of those whom God has called to be members of one body, and the efficacy of the prayers which they offer through their Head in the one Spirit. Before resolving to absent himself from social worship or to break any other rule intended for the common edification, a Christian ought to satisfy himself not only that the ordinance is not good for his own soul, but also that it is one of which he may beneficially promote the general disuse. He should not only ask, Can I stay away from Church without loss? but, Is it desirable that other people also should not come to Church?—not only, Is it profitable for myself that I should spend Sunday in such a way? but, Would it be better for the community in general to spend it in a similar way? In Christ, no man lives to himself; and rules which it is good for the whole body that the members should observe, become thereby binding on the individual members.

(6) Lastly, dear brethren, let me make this

appeal to you, Do not think of your true and acceptable prayers as if they originated in yourselves only. Remember that, if we believe our Lord and his Apostles, it is God who teaches us to pray, it is the inworking Spirit who prompts our most secret and unconscious impulses of prayer. A wonderful doctrine, fruitful in consequences, rich in instruction and comfort ! If God gives to his children the Spirit of prayer, let us ask for it, receive it, cherish it ; let us suffer it to take possession of us and master us. Being Divine, let us not doubt that if we welcome it into an open and teachable mind, it will prove itself to be in harmony with Reason and with Charity. Whatever we ask in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we ask rightly and acceptably. To pray in the Spirit is the true deliverance from selfish prayer, from mechanical prayer, from frivolous prayer, from ostentatious prayer. Let us rejoice to believe that, in the incomprehensible mystery of our spiritual life, God himself moves us to ask of him what he knows better than we that we want, and what he desires to give us more than we care to ask it.

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**Trench—continued.**

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